

Take Care of Mental Health: Letter From a Graduate



Hailey Eckstein
Willamette Connections
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Dear graduating class of 2022,
Where do I begin? We made it, even with all the obstacles that stood in our way. So, let me start by saying congratulations! Who would have guessed when we started this journey through high school that we would live through the historic things we have experienced. We overcame all the pandemic-related problems including learning difficulties, mental health struggles, and more.

Life after graduation is hard enough for seniors, but now we're faced with lingering COVID conditions, wars, the highest inflation since the 1980s, attempting equal rights for all, and here we are. Sometimes it feels like we have stepped back in the past while still being in the moment. How do we navigate life now? Well, some of us will go to college, some will start working, but all of us should take care of our mental health through all of this.

Some graduates were forced into a completely new learning experience in the middle of high school. From the perspective of a few of my friends who went through distance learning after being used to an in-person school setting, the transition was very difficult. I'm thankful to have been in a full-time online public school since kindergarten, so I didn't feel the major life change that most of you did. Being able to finish high school in the same virtual education environment is a major accomplishment for me.

Now, after all the things going on

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around us, they tell us we're adults and must know what we want to do and who we want to be right out of high school. I don't know about you, but I don't have my entire life planned out. Even though I want to further my academic career and become a preschool teacher that may not be who I end up being in the long run.

We don't know and that's okay, but it's important to have a plan. Planning allows us to figure out what we want and if things change along the way

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that's okay, too. We need to be able to adjust and feel that it's okay to change our minds. Don't get overwhelmed figuring out what you want to do. Make sure to have people around you who support you and want what's best for you. The biggest thing is learning who you are and loving that person.

Online school helped me be able to do that, because I wasn't as influenced by my peers as much, and the loved ones around me accepted me for whoever I wanted to be at that time. Never feel forced to be something someone else wants you to be. One of my favorite Dr. Seuss quotes goes like this, "Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind."

Before you venture out into the world beyond high school, be sure to thank those who supported you and got you to this point — family, friends, teachers,

coaches, and many other mentors along the way. The things they taught you will last a lifetime and many will still be there for you in the years ahead.

Finally, with the world changing so fast it's important not to get overloaded with the drama life brings. Remember to take mental health days, practice self-care, and enjoy the beautiful things that surround us, because there's always a positive out there, we just have to find it.

Best of luck no matter where your journey leads. Hailey

Hailey Eckstein is a member of the Willamette Connections Academy's Graduating Class of 2022. Willamette Connections Academy is now enrolling for the 2022-23 academic year. To learn more about the school or to begin the enrollment process visit www.WillametteConnectionsAcademy.com or call (800) 382-6010.

Wheelers nurture a growing tennis culture

Edith Noriega

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

This is part of a weekly series introducing readers to individuals who are passionate about our Mid-Valley community.

Tennis is one of those sports you can play for a lifetime.

Gary and Catherine Wheeler have proven that adage, dedicating a lifetime's worth of tennis at the Salem Tennis and Swim Club and Sprague High School's boys tennis team.

"I like teaching not just kids but adults," Gary, Sprague's head tennis coach, said. "My classes at the club, I teach one gal who's 84 years old and a few that are in their 70s; just started playing and are doing really well. I like to see people just improve and have fun at it.

"One of the first things I always say to my kids when I walk up to the fence is, 'Are you having fun yet?'"

Gary and Catherine have co-coached Sprague to numerous district and state titles since becoming involved with the program in 2006.

But their tennis roots stretch back to Gary's early playing days at Chemeketa Community College and at De Anza College in Cupertino, Calif. Gary, a member of the Salem Tennis and Swim Club since the early 1980s, eventually took over as general manager for 12 years in 1994.

He entered the commercial flooring business before returning to the club as a tennis professional in 2017.

One thing Gary fondly remembers more than anything else was the love for tennis he and Catherine instilled in their four sons.

"We raised our boys playing tennis since they were 5," Gary said.

All four of the Wheeler sons played for the Olympians at one point — Curt (2006 graduate), Matt (2008 graduate), Brent (2011 graduate) and Scott (2014 graduate).

Curt, a 2006 singles state champion, and Matt, a doubles second-round at state that year, were the first taste of state title glory under then-head coach Catherine and then-assistant coach Gary.

Catherine was at the helm as head coach the first nine years she and Gary spent at Sprague; and together they led the team to three state championships, a second-place finish in 2011 and numerous district titles.

"She helped me make the rosters," Gary said. "I listened for the most part, I don't want to take any credit away, but I needed to have somebody here on time. I said, 'Why don't you (Catherine) just be head coach, I'll go as assistant coach and you'll get all the glory.'"

Curt graduated from Point Loma Nazarene in 2010, where he was named



Gary Wheeler and his wife, Catherine have been involved with the Sprague's boys tennis program since 2006. EDITH NORIEGA/STATESMAN JOURNAL

an NAIA All-American. He has remained at the San Diego-based university since being named head coach for the Sea Lions' men's and women's tennis programs in 2015.

Meanwhile, Scott — the youngest of the brothers — helped the Olympians win four district titles in his four years. In 2015, he played one season at San Diego Mesa Community College, attended Chemeketa but did not play tennis; and played two years of tennis at Arizona Christian University.

Scott completed his senior year of tennis at Point Loma in 2019.

Unexpected news and family loss

Brent, a four-time district champion — two in doubles and two in singles, reached the state quarterfinals his freshman year alongside doubles partner and older brother Matt.

With a new doubles partner, Brent placed third his sophomore year in 2009. He competed in singles at state his junior and senior years, losing in the semifinals each time.

He continued to play tennis at Division I Portland State University, where he set a then-program record with 12 wins before graduating in 2016. He had a brief stint as manager of the West Hills Racquet and Fitness Club in Beaverton,

and right before a cancer diagnosis had taken an instructor position at the Salem Tennis and Swim Club.

Brent was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in late fall of 2017. Although the prognosis seemed relatively optimistic, he ran into early complications with chemotherapy that ruptured his appendix, delaying a critical stem cell transplant donated by his brothers.

After healing from surgery due to the appendicitis, Brent was listed as leukemia free in June after receiving CAR T-cell immunotherapy treatment as well as the stem cell transplant.

But four days later, an excessive amount of fluids surrounded his stomach. That turned out to be a new cancer that was untreatable — to which Gary added, "we just kept fighting."

"It was a long, long year," Gary said. "He is the reason why I'll keep coaching here (Sprague) and because of the kids."

Brent died in August 2018, at the age of 25.

Return to Sprague and a brighter future

In the midst of Brent's cancer battle, Gary and Catherine stepped away from all coaching duties at Sprague. They returned in 2019, the same year Judson

Bair was the state runner-up, this time under head coach Gary.

"We got each other's back," Catherine said. "There's two of us instead of one when we need to help, especially in the matches. We'll say, 'This guy really needs to work on this or that' and we'll go home, talk about lineups and everything else because we are together."

Despite the canceled seasons in 2020 and 2021, Gary noticed that tennis and pickleball grew in popularity in Salem during the coronavirus pandemic because of its accessibility.

"This year I had 34 kids try out, which that's the most I've ever had," Gary said. "I have kids asking about playing in the summertime and that's just music to my ears."

Although Gary predicted the next three years are "going to be great," he added that he plans on coaching at Sprague for at least another 10 — well into his late 70s.

"I've got guys that really helped and people offering to help now more so than ever," Gary said. "And I've had to say, 'No, I don't need it' because I got enough."

Edith Noriega is a sports reporter. You may reach her at ENoriega@salem.gannett.com and follow her on Twitter at @Noriega_Edith.